

EPRS 2008 Comments...

The Massachusetts Public Health Laboratory Training Office has now been absorbed into the Office of Laboratory Response and Communication. The office has evolved from a staff of four FTE (full time employees) to one FTE and then back to five FTE while continuing to have little significant administrative staff support or budget with increased communication and training responsibilities/expectations.

Despite these difficulties, the office remains committed to excellence, leadership and innovation in continuing education, training and public health outreach. The goal of continued improvement in the quality of laboratory services and testing in the Commonwealth is the primary objective. That goal is achieved through the promotion, design, development and facilitation of high quality, cost-effective training programs and products for public health partners.

Over the last several years, the office resources and the nature of training have changed significantly. The office has become increasingly involved in the design, development and facilitation of a variety of preparedness and workforce development programs and products while maintaining the provision of laboratory training programs in direct response to new public health strategies, direct needs assessments, emerging and re-emerging communicable diseases and newly developed diagnostic technologies. The office also assumes a limited responsibility for in-house safety training and works with the facility Safety Officer and Safety Committee as necessary.

The office is committed to ensuring that the knowledge, skills and safety of in-house staff are supported and has brought in outside contractors to ensure that public health laboratory professionals have the tools and skills needed to protect themselves and the work environment.

The loss of the Training Laboratory as a “viable” venue for conducting “wet” workshops continues to severely limit the type of programs that can be offered at the Institute. Wet workshops and other programs co-sponsored with the National Laboratory Training Network (NLTN) are required to self-supporting or cost/revenue neutral. Our experience is that the break-even for a small wet-workshop is approximately 20 participants.

Funding and purchasing issues remain a primary source of frustration and program obstruction. The State Training Coordinator was not consulted regarding 2009 fiscal budgeting and was not asked to submit a budget or plan by senior staff members. Access to funding and revenue streams is highly problematic and the attitude of the Purchasing Department regarding small grants is problematic. A cohesive system for handling grants and special projects does not exist or cannot be accessed effectively.

Other issues such as parking and conference room availability limit training capabilities. The training office has worked with educational institutions (i.e. Bristol Community College, Taunton High School) and professional groups (ASM) to offer off-site

workshops. The office continues to encourage the support of professional organizations through the provision of unrestricted educational grants to accomplish this goal.

Increased concern for the responsible stewardship of biosafety and security requires working with a variety of new groups and individuals in different ways. This has been trying since many do not understand the role of the State Training Coordinator (STC) and are not aware of the changing capabilities and resources the Laboratory Response & Communication Office faces. It is very difficult for the STC to attend every meeting or to be or do everything that each group or individual needs related to all laboratory training while maintaining basic services.

The attitude of administration related to travel for employees is extremely difficult. Even travel requests that are not funded through the Commonwealth are met with intense scrutiny. Most of the staff in our laboratories are highly technical scientists who must have access to continuing education and networking that attendance at workshops and meetings provides.